Issue № 183: When Your Tuxedo Attempts a Coup d'état: A Formalwear Fiasco

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition—an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart—it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."

--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

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Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded) To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft** (or **Culinary Construct**): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, "China Wok Habitue," suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it's more likely a testament to the local takeout joint's generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid

THE MAGNETRON'S MANIFESTO: AN INVENTOR'S ASCENDANCY IN HOWLAND, MAINE

By Lisbeth Rehina Brewer

The night over Howland, Maine, was a velvet shroud, worn thin in places, whispering of pine and undone things. Beside a road that was less a pathway and more a question etched into the dark, a figure stirred.

He wore a chef's hat, blinding white, impossibly pristine against the rural gloom. He pushed a cart, the old Raytheon Radarange microwave oven perched upon it, a dull, metal mirror reflecting the indifferent stars, a cosmic vaudeville act playing out in silent static.

This was Percy Spencer, though the name felt less a fixed point and more a series of echoes, held together by the low, persistent hum of a magnetron – a sound he carried within him, a thrumming against the back of his teeth, even when the machine slept. He wasn't walking, not precisely. He was *unfolding* onto the asphalt, a gesture of profound, if slightly mildewed, presence. The chef's hat tilted, catching a shard of moonlight. It felt strangely buoyant tonight.

Headlights, like a misplaced, unwelcome thought, sliced through the darkness. The car slowed, hesitant. A window rolled down.

"Evening," a voice called out, cautious, laced with the particular Maine blend of suspicion and reluctant curiosity. "You need some help there?"

Spencer stopped. The cart squeaked, a minor clause in the grand social contract being quietly revised. He turned, his face shadowed by the hat. The glint in his eye held the

deadpan earnestness of a Perelmanesque Patter Merchant, on the verge of delivering a profound truth via rapid-fire nonsense.

"Help?" Spencer repeated, the word tasting like dust and unpopped kernels. "One is *always* in need of help, wouldn't you agree? Especially when navigating the liminal spaces between Here and What Comes After, particularly if What Comes After involves a significant lack of adequate refrigeration. But I suppose you mean assistance with the cart. A reasonable assumption. A logical non sequitur in this illogical existence."

The driver, a man named Earl whose face was a study in bewildered pragmatism, blinked. "Uh, yeah. The cart. Looks heavy."

"Heavy," Spencer said, adjusting the Radarange, his voice a low rumble, "is a relative term. Conceptually, it is as light as a forgotten promise. Physically, it holds the weight of industrial progress and the existential ennui of the post-war boom. Care for a bite?"

Before Earl could formulate a coherent response, Spencer reached into a pocket of his apron, which *where had that come from?* He produced a handful of gravel, a tarnished penny, and a single, tear-shaped drop of condensation. These he placed on a small, metal plate balanced on the Radarange.

"First course," Spencer announced. "The 'Pre-Patent Pre-Popcorn,' derived from the gravel of humble origins, the penny of nominal compensation, and the tear of initial skepticism."

He gestured towards the plate. A faint, internal hum began, almost imperceptible, unless you weren't actively listening for it. The gravel softened, the penny shimmered, and the tear vibrated. In seconds, they coalesced into something vaguely biscuit-like, smelling faintly of ozone and disappointment.

"Try it," Spencer urged.

Earl hesitated, then, driven by a sense of cosmic obligation he didn't understand, picked up the biscuit. It was warm, surprisingly soft. He bit into it.

It didn't taste like anything recognizable. It tasted like *being twelve years old in Maine again.* Like the ache in his feet after a long day of manual labor, like the sudden, inexplicable urge to learn about radio waves just because they existed. It tasted like raw potential mixed with institutional indifference.

"It... it tastes like... the spool mill," Earl mumbled, startled.

Spencer nodded, adjusting his hat. "Ah, yes. Alchemical Authenticity. The transformation of base materiality into resonant memory. A trick the marketeers never quite grasped. They focused on speed. I focused on the *essence.*"

"Essence of... spool mill?" Earl asked, bewildered.

"Among other things," Spencer replied, pulling out new ingredients: a coil of rusted barbed wire, a snippet of dried conversation ("...no solid data..."), and a single, perfectly preserved dandelion head. "Now, for the 'Consumers Union Anxiety Salad,' tossed with the dressing of Unquantifiable Doubt."

He placed these in front of the Radarange. The hum intensified, joined by a faint, unsettling whisper that seemed to come from the very metal of the machine, like the suppressed anxieties of a thousand housewives and restaurant owners. The barbed wire softened and untwisted, becoming delicate, grey tendrils. The snippet of conversation dissolved into a fine mist that coated the tendrils. The dandelion head remained, but began to pulse with a dim, internal light.

"This dish," Spencer lectured, adopting the rhythm of a Lyceum speaker veering wildly off-topic, "highlights the exquisite tension between technological assurance and the fundamental human unease with things we cannot fully perceive. Much like the inexplicable reappearance of existential dread after a particularly vigorous session of

interpretive dance, as documented in 'The Unexpected Implications of Corvid Linguistics, Vol. IV, Section B,' footnote 7."

Earl stared at the plate. The tendrils looked like miniature scars. The mist tasted faintly metallic. He ate a bite.

It tasted like the weight of regulations he didn't understand, like the nagging fear that something wasn't *quite* right with the world. It tasted like a forgotten safety manual left out in the rain. His left hand, suddenly, felt cold, and emitted the faint but distinct aroma of fresh-baked bread – a peculiar somatic response to technological uncertainty.

"My hand smells like... like a bakery," Earl said, holding it up.

"A classic symptom," Spencer confirmed, unfazed. "The body attempting to anchor itself to a simpler, more tangible reality in the face of quantum instability. Or perhaps merely a stray crumb from a previous experiment. The universe is notoriously bad at tidiness."

The absurdity escalated. Spencer produced ingredients that defied description: a crumpled piece of spacetime, the sound of a dog barking backward, a feeling of profound gratitude for a particularly comfortable pair of socks. He "cooked" them, not in the oven, but in the space around it. The air took on the crystalline resonance of a freshly tuned harpsichord, then shifted, subtly warping Earl's perception until the roadside seemed to tilt, and the distant trees appeared to be whispering secrets about Euclidean geometry.

"The plot, if one could call it such a rigid construct," Spencer mused aloud, tossing a handful of chronological inconsistency onto the Radarange's surface, "is like a well-thumbed edition of *Alice in Wonderland* re-indexed by a mad librarian. Every dish a non sequitur, every flavor a surprise visit from a talking teacup seeking tenure in the Department of Gastronomical Absurdity."

He created a dish that was merely the *idea* of burnt toast, which filled Earl with the melancholic introspection of a May Generation poet contemplating unrequited love. He conjured a liquid that tasted like the color blue and made Earl's memories of the sea

smell like lavender – a minor clause in the grand social contract, as outlined on page 7 of the Official Handbook of Acceptable Sentiments, Second Edition (Revised for Public Consumption).

Earl felt less like a driver on a Maine road and more like an audience member at an Unhinged Liminal Revue, watching a lecture series where each speaker brought a different, often contradictory, perspective. He was the Ayoadean Observer, witnessing the bizarre spectacle with a deadpan sense of 'This is Fine.' He was the Eco-centric Detective, searching for order in the chaotic text presented before him.

Finally, Spencer produced his pièce de résistance: a single, glowing ember that smelled faintly of forgotten folk melodies. He placed it on the cart beside the Radarange.

"The 'Patent Application Consommé,'" Spencer announced. "Reduced from the fire of invention, tempered by the water of bureaucratic process, served lukewarm. It reveals the 'Scars' – the moments where the elegant theory met the messy reality. Observe."

He gestured again. The ember pulsed, brighter this time, and the entire cart began to vibrate. The metal of the Radarange seemed to soften, its sharp edges blurring. The chef's hat on Spencer's head felt lighter still, pulling gently upward.

"Everything is in a state of becoming," Spencer whispered, his voice acquiring the gravelly timbre of Bob Dylan at his most enigmatic. "Forms transmute. Materials weep. An inventor is merely a catalyst in the great Chymical Collage. Sometimes, the invention transforms the inventor, you see."

The cart rattled violently. The Radarange shimmered, then dissolved into a shower of tiny, metallic questions that rained down on the asphalt with a sound like distant applause. The cart collapsed into a pile of twisted wire and existential grit.

But Spencer remained, his white chef's hat now visibly inflated, tugging him upward.

"Well," he said, looking down at Earl with the benevolent smile of a Wrightian Oracle delivering a profound, koan-like summary that was utterly unhelpful. "It appears my trajectory has been... adjusted. Seeking Quality, you see. The ultimate patent application."

"Adjusted?" Earl managed, his mind struggling to re-index reality. "You're... floating."

"Indeed," Spencer confirmed, rising slowly into the night sky. "Gravity, much like a rigid narrative structure, is merely a suggestion. A social construct, if you will. Though I suspect my hat is now pursuing a doctoral degree in philology, specializing in the semiotics of forgotten slogans. A most unusual non sequitur."

He drifted higher, a white speck against the indifferent stars. The faint hum of the magnetron faded, replaced by the melancholic whisper of the wind through the trees, carrying echoes of broken promises and the scent of phantom bread.

Earl stood by his car, hand still smelling of baking, the taste of spool mill and anxiety lingering on his tongue. The roadside was empty, marked only by a scattering of metallic dust and a singular, pulsing dandelion head.

He was left with the lingering echo, a scar etched onto his consciousness: the beautiful, bewildering lesson that the world, like a microwave oven, could take the mundane and transform it into something...

BORN TO HOBBLE (UNDEFEATED)

By Freda Ajam

I. The Ramp's Ochre Kiss (for the 28.7%)

Your new name is not a name. It is a texture, a felt absence. You propel yourself, not with muscle solely, but with the phantom limb of a dream of flight. This ramp, no mere incline, but a tongue tasting the grit of your journey. My companion, less a chair, more a mobile constellation mapping the uneven terrain of their seeing. They see a stumble; we trace the calligraphy of another kind of movement, a choreography etched by what is not there. This town, a lung exhaling sighs of asphalt and the sharp intake of unexpected beauty found in the detour, the pause. Each revolution of the wheel whispers back to the void. What is the color of resilience? The ochre kiss of the ramp under unexpected rain. Tonight, we might chart a course beyond the cartography of pity, towards the longitude of belonging. The moving sculptures they imagine? They are the imprints we leave on the world, a testament to a physics understood only through lived weight. We were not born to arrive; we were born to become the arrival.

II. Cardboard Cathedral Under a Phosphorescent Sky (for the 0.23%)

Born to Hobble has shed its skin. Now, a whisper of shelter. The night exhales a breath that carries the scent of cracked concrete and the fragile geometry of want. Underneath, the thin membrane of cardboard, a temporary architecture against the immensity of stars – each a pinprick of longing. Born to run? No. Born to the slow erosion of waiting, each footfall on unforgiving ground a silent stanza. This is not a ballad, but a found poem scrawled on discarded scraps, a narrative woven from hunger and the faint pulse of hope. My pockets, hollows echoing with the weight of unsown seeds. Tonight, the moon, a bruised plum in the inky sky, might cast its liquid light

upon our makeshift sanctuary, transforming it into a cathedral of the forgotten. We were born to keep walking towards the faintest blush on the horizon, towards the rumor of warmth, the echo of a door that opens. The most valuable possession? The echo of a name whispered in the dark.

III. The Clinking of a Jar, a Constellation of Small Mercies (for the 11.1%)

Your new name hums with the quiet voltage of held-back tears. Born to run? Born into the intricate dance of making-do, where the smallest coin sings a psalm of possibility. This clinking, not just metal on glass, but a tiny orchestra of hope in the hollow of the year. The weight of what is owed, a cloak woven with invisible threads of anxiety. Yet, beneath, the fierce bloom of dreams pushing through the cracked pavement of expectation. This is not a lament, but an inventory of ingenuity, a testament to the shared breath of community. Aspirations unfold like origami from the thinnest paper. Tonight, perhaps a shared meal, a story told over steaming mugs, a communion of scarcity that transcends the arithmetic of lack. We were born to nurture the improbable seed, to trace the delicate veins of survival on a borrowed leaf. The richest possession? The invisible architecture of shared strength.

(And continuing this style for the remaining sections):

IV. The Mind's Unfolding Atlas (for the 22.8% and 5.5%)

Born to Hobble now wears the silken rustle of inner weather. The softest inhale, a tether to the fragile now. The world, a cacophony of bright edges, but within, a still point where the compass spins freely. Born to run? The interior landscape shifts and reforms, a terrain both familiar and alien. They say find stillness; we are cartographers of its myriad forms. This is not a descent, but an ascent into the labyrinth of self, each turn a revelation. My journal, a vessel for the unspooling narrative. Tonight, may the inner sky clear, revealing constellations of self-acceptance. We were born to navigate the currents of feeling, to chart the uncharted territories of the self. The most beautiful landscape? The quiet resilience blooming in the valleys of the mind.

V. The Body's Gentle Cartography (for the 9.4%)

Born to Hobble learns the language of its own gravity. The steady pulse, a quiet affirmation in the vast silence. The reflection, not a judgment, but a gentle acknowledgment of the form that holds this story. Born to run? Born to move with intention, each step a conversation with the earth. Transformation begins not with subtraction, but with a tender embrace of what is. This is not a chase, but a slow waltz with self-compassion, the body a sacred text. Tonight, a moment of quiet movement, a silent dialogue between skin and soul. We were born to inhabit this form with grace, to find the rhythm within. The most nourishing journey? The slow, deliberate unfolding of self-love.

VI. The Echo of a Hand in the Lingering Shadow (for the 6%)

Born to Hobble carries the phantom weight of what was. The whisper of a voice that knows the shape of fear. A hand offered, a lifeline in the fog of memory. Born to run? The past, a persistent echo, but the present holds the fragile promise of dawn. Healing is a slow unfolding, like a bruised petal reaching for the light. This is not a flight, but a courageous return to the self, breath by painstaking breath. My memories, fragments of a shattered mirror, slowly piecing themselves back together. Tonight, may sleep offer a gentle harbor. We were born to seek the quiet shores of peace, to gather the fragments of what was lost. The quiet strength? The unwavering will to greet the sunrise.

VII. The Unfurling Path (for the 10.2% and 9.7%)

Born to Hobble finds a new trajectory. The quiet strength of choosing a different current. The gentle hand of community, an anchor in the storm. Born to run? The old urges may linger, but the path ahead shimmers with a fragile clarity. Recovery is a pilgrimage, each step a testament to the tenacious human spirit. This is not a fall, but a slow, deliberate climb towards the summit of self. My hands, reaching not for oblivion, but for connection. Tonight, may the path be illuminated by the quiet stars of hope.

We were born to walk towards the light, to discover the fierce beauty of sobriety. The most courageous step? The first breath of a new dawn.

VIII. The Whispered "No," a Seed of Defiance (for the 1 in 5 Women)

Born to Hobble finds its voice. The quiet power of a refused darkness. The slow unfurling of self-love, a fierce bloom in barren ground. Born to run? Away from the long night, towards the fragile dawn of safety. You are not a story of pain, but a testament to the unyielding spirit. This is not victimhood, but a fierce reclaiming. My voice, a fragile thing at first, now gaining strength with each uttered truth. Tonight, may the shadows recede, replaced by the gentle glow of self-assurance. We were born to run towards our own becoming, towards the fierce light of self-determination. The most beautiful sound? The resonant chord of a voice set free.

IX. The Dignity of Footfalls (for the 5,900+ Race-Based Hate Crimes)

Born to Hobble walks with an undeniable grace. The quiet power of presence in a world that tries to erase. The vibrant hues of a shared humanity, a defiant tapestry against the monochrome of hate. Born to run? Through streets that should welcome every footfall, with hearts that carry the weight of history and the fierce insistence of hope. Love is the quiet rebellion, blooming in the face of ignorance. This is not a journey through fear, but a steadfast march towards a horizon where every color sings. Our heritage, not a burden, but a vibrant song. Tonight, may the stars witness our unwavering hope for a world where every heart finds its home. We were born to walk with dignity, towards the radiant dawn of true belonging. The most powerful statement? The unwavering symphony of presence and love.

2015

The Absurdist Apophenia of US Route One: A Kittery Canticle

By Floyd Duncan

The sun, a brazen thumbprint on the cerulean canvas, beat down on US Route One in Kittery, Maine. Roast Beef Hat, a man whose sartorial choices skewed heavily towards the inexplicable, ambled along, a mannequin's leg serving as his jaunty cane. He hummed a ditty, a Carolina Buddies tune about rolling fat ones and lean ones until the break of day, his feet, much to the chagrin of local podiatrists, cushioned by bread bags inside his worn boots. The day's unexpected warmth prompted him to shed his lined flannel jacket, flinging it into a ditch with the casual flourish of a monarch divesting himself of a troublesome ermine.

"Constantine, old friend," Roast Beef Hat declared to the giant rubber chicken perched with unsettling equilibrium on his shoulder, its synthetic comb performing a crimson jig. "Behold the delicate clockwork of the human mind, laid bare like a particularly overcooked goose in this liminal highway space. Is not the very act of transit a philosophical probe into the nature of 'becoming' versus 'being'?"

Constantine, whose rubbery gaze seemed to contain the condensed wisdom of every library ever reduced to kindling, responded with a series of squawks that vibrated with the deep resonance of a low-frequency hum. "Indeed, dear Roast Beef Hat. As certain French novelists might have observed of their heroines' yearnings, their vehicular passage is but a futile attempt to outrun the inherent entropy of existence. Yet, as other German physicists mused, all motion is relative, so perhaps their destination is merely a more advanced state of relative non-arrival. One must consider the collective unconscious exhaling hydrocarbons, the exhaust a kind of Jungian shadow puppet show."

A Honda Civic, its windows tinted to an almost opaque void, glided past. From within, the driver, a woman in sensible spectacles, disembarked with the ethereal grace of a moth emerging from a chrysalis, hovering serenely beside them. "Forgive my unscheduled egress," she intoned, her voice possessing the surprising clarity of a well-tuned bell, "but the latest census data for Kittery indicates an average daily vehicle count of 22,347 on this very stretch of road. My anecdotal observation, however, suggests a conspicuously higher proportion of Subaru Outbacks."

At that precise moment, the sign for the McDonald's Kitchen Collection Factory Outlet, usually a humble declaration of discounted spatulas, pulsed with an almost unbearable effulgence, casting shadows that writhed with an unsettling vibrancy.

"Ah, a most delectable data point, madam!" exclaimed Roast Beef Hat, executing a shallow bow with the mannequin leg. "Proof, if ever it were needed, that the empirical, when viewed through the kaleidoscope of individual perception, transmutes into a vibrant, subjective truth. What say you, Constantine? Does not this data speak to the very 'Quality' of human endeavor, as certain American philosophers so eloquently sought?"

Constantine bobbed his head with an almost violent emphasis. "Precisely, my good man! And yet, from a purely quantum perspective, is not each Subaru Outback a potential wave function of infinite culinary possibilities, perhaps even containing an unobserved, perfectly seasoned, philosophical hamburger? The Kittery Trading Post, for example, now glows with the luminous intensity of a cosmic singularity, drawing us inward with an almost gravitational pull."

Indeed, the Kittery Trading Post sign now shimmered with the brilliance of a freshly minted sun. A pickup truck, battered and emblazoned with a "Maine Lobster" sticker, drifted by, and from its bed emerged a burly man in a plaid shirt, floating alongside them. "Can confirm," he grunted, a voice like rocks tumbling in a dryer. "My cousin once traded a perfectly good canoe for a set of fishing lures at that very Trading Post. Said the lures sang to him. Odd fella, that one."

“A most compelling narrative!” Roast Beef Hat declared, a wide, beatific smile spreading across his face like jam on toast. “The personal anecdote, a testament to the unpredictable currents of human desire. It truly captures the essence of the unhinged liminal revue, wouldn’t you agree, Constantine?”

Constantine clucked, a sound like gravel rolling in a tin drum. “The pursuit of ‘Quality’ often manifests in seemingly illogical exchanges, Roast Beef Hat. Consider the socio-economic implications of bartering a canoe for singing lures. A fascinating deconstruction of capitalistic norms, and an excellent example of certain playwrights’ ‘absurdist echo chambers of power’ in miniature. The siren song of the lure, if you will, a melody akin to the forgotten folk songs of a cosmic cowpoke, calling us to the existential abyss.”

With a renewed sense of purpose, Roast Beef Hat strode towards the Kittery Trading Post, the mannequin leg thumping rhythmically against the asphalt like a metronome gone rogue. He pushed open the heavy wooden doors, and the interior, usually a chaotic jumble of outdoor gear, seemed to swell with an almost religious glow, as if the very air hummed with profound revelation. Without a moment’s hesitation, Roast Beef Hat unbuckled his belt and let his pants fall to his ankles, revealing a pair of bright red boxers with dancing lobsters. He then extended his trousers towards a sales associate, whose expression was a masterpiece of bewildered apprehension.

“A rifle, if you please,” he announced grandly, his voice echoing in the now hushed store, “for these magnificent trousers. They have seen many journeys, many philosophical debates, and hold within their very fibers the echoes of existential ennui, not to mention a rather persistent faint odor of mothballs.”

The sales associate’s eyes widened to the approximate size of dinner plates. A sudden, shimmering chorus of young voices, clear and innocent as spring water, filled the air, singing “The Murder of the Lawson Family.” Roast Beef Hat began to sway, then twirl, his lobster boxers a flash of scarlet in the dazzling light, dancing with a joyous abandon to the macabre tune.

The police arrived swiftly, their cruisers pulling up to the Trading Post with a wail that seemed almost orchestral, a dissonant chord in the symphony of the absurd. Two officers, their faces a mixture of confusion and concern, entered the store. Roast Beef Hat, still mid-pirouette, was gently but firmly apprehended, his dance abruptly curtailed by the firm grip of public service. As he was carried out, his legs flailing in a final, joyous kick, he and Constantine, still perched on his shoulder like a feathered gargoyle, looked back at the glowing interior.

"Magnificent, children!" Roast Beef Hat cried, his voice echoing back into the store, a final pronouncement from the vanishing stage. "Such precision! Such emotional depth! A truly masterful rendition of the 'Murder of the Lawson Family'!"

Constantine gave a final, resonant squawk, a sound of profound rubbery contentment. "Indeed! The perfect curtain call for our unhinged liminal revue. A testament to the enduring power of raw, unadulterated human expression, even when clad in dancing lobster underwear. Bravo! Bravo!"

The police car pulled away, its siren fading into the distant hum of Route One, leaving behind the lingering scent of discount outdoor gear and the faint, unsettling echo of a third-grade chorus. The liminal space, it seemed, had absorbed another performance into its perpetually unfolding narrative.

BLACK GROUND FLOWERS 327.
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I Saw Ella

By Velma Foster-Grey

I

I watch Ella next door
tiptoe through my hydrangeas–
fresh as new money, that girl–
whispering secrets I once tucked
into the pockets of my nightgown.

II

Last Tuesday at the IGA
I won a ham–
a pink boar that snuffled
across my linoleum
its legs twitching like frightened jewels.
I dressed it in velvet ribbon,
sang lullabies into its ear:
“We’ll feast at Sunday’s dawn.”

III

But when sleep folds its wings,
I travel to Rome again:
marble columns cracking
under the weight of chained feet,
fat patricians fanning themselves
as human hands haul stones,

draw water—become the empire's heartbeat.
Men bought and sold like cattle,
their sweat laced into roads
and aqueducts that still whisper
of injustice.

IV

My uncle stands at the kitchen window,
cigarette ash—gray rain
tumbling from his hand.
He presses flame to melanoma
on his arm—hisses as if fire
could burn away more than skin.
No cure in that smoke—just a bitter vow
to chase death with dying.

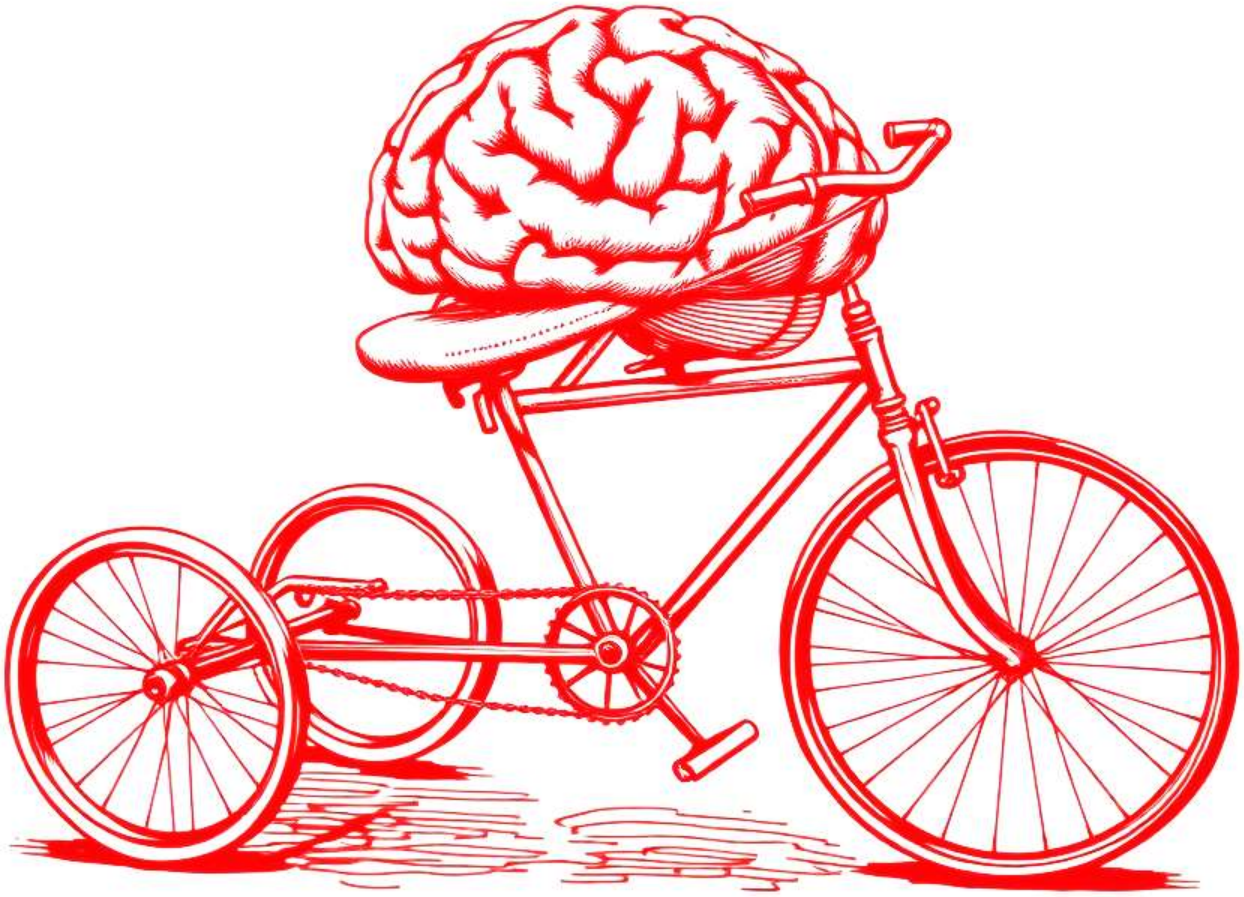
V

Tonight I hum George Jones—
his voice a cracked bourbon barrel
spilling heartbreak into the dark.
Nobody bends a sorrowed note
like him; nobody wrings
the soul so tenderly.
I weep for loves
I never held, ones I let slip
through the fingers of time.

VI

Ella slips through the back fence,
cradles the IGA ham as if it were an omen.

I pour her whiskey—"Drink," I say,
"so you'll dream of distant cities."
Maybe on those dusty Roman roads
we'll walk side by side—
mistress and slave, lovers and ghosts—
while the ham rises like a rose-fired phoenix,
bathed in dawn light.
George Jones crackles on the radio,
my uncle's cough echoing through the dusk,
and Rome falls again beneath our feet
as we chatter of flesh and time
and discover that nothing ever ends.



The Cerebral Tricycle and the Unsung Ally

BY BUZZ FLETCHER

The asphalt shimmered, a viscous mirage in the Delaware afternoon, as Xander Hanes, erstwhile athlete and current curator of cranial couture, piloted his brain-shaped trike. Its stucco facade, a riot of primary colors and a knowing leer pulsed with an almost biochemical effervescence. He docked outside the Newark Shaws, where the olfactory symphony of fermented yeast and roasted beans conducted a subtle, yet undeniable, gravitational pull on the passing human flotsam.

Xander, a man whose professional trajectory had veered from courtly leaps to philanthropic quests, remembered the struggling teams of the eighties. His athletic career, a tapestry woven with the threads of minor injuries and existential sighs, had nonetheless bequeathed upon him an unbroken spirit, now channeled into the Brain Injury Association of America and other worthy causes. He was, in essence, a human antenna, broadcasting the frequency of compassion.

A smooth-talking shadow detached itself from the indifferent throng.

"Good buddy," the stranger began, his voice a balm of practiced sincerity, "local charity. Excellent cerebral conveyance you've got there. Partnership, perhaps? Amplify the amplification?"

Xander's internal alarm, a low hum of quality assessment, flickered. Before he could formulate a response, a voice, sharp and clear as a well-struck gong, cut through the humid air.

"Hold up. That's not a good idea." Dream Whip, a kinetic tableau of intelligence in a wheelchair, arrived, her eyes, keen and glinting.

The stranger's practiced smile underwent a micro-fracture, a brief cessation of its well-oiled performance. "And who might you be, pray tell?"
"Dream Whip. Vigilant observer of Xander's excellent work," she stated, her tone a delicate balance of firmness and polite disinterest. "His 'help,' I believe, is quite sufficient."

Xander, a man accustomed to the unpredictable bounces of life, felt a wave of profound gratitude wash over him. His uncertainty, a fleeting illusion, dissipated. "Thanks, Dream. Appreciate the assist."

As the stranger, a hastily retreating anecdote, vanished into the heat haze, Dream Whip turned to Xander. "Fundraising, then? You're certainly a spectacle."

Xander chuckled, the lines around his eyes deepening. "A mixed bag, as philosophical treatises often are. Some embrace the absurd, others merely walk past the unhinged revue."

Dream Whip nodded, a subtle acknowledgement of the cosmic joke. "My vote, at least, is cast. Any need for additional, shall we say, stagehands?"

Xander's face illuminated with the quiet warmth of a nascent revelation. "Actually, yes. A second pair of eyes, perhaps to discern the genuine from the merely theatrical."

As the afternoon wore on, Dream Whip proved to be an invaluable co-conspirator.

Her unshakeable optimism, a beacon in the general apathy, drew donors in, each conversation a micro-Lyceum, a brief lecture on empathy. Xander found himself drawn to her quick wit, a series of parapsychological non sequiturs delivered with perfect, deadpan timing.

The sun, a tired orange disc, began its descent, bathing the scene in a soft, melancholic glow. Xander and Dream Whip, two unlikely archetypes of absurdity, rested on the curb. The brain-shaped trike, a silent testament to their purposeful chaos, seemed to hum with an emergent property all its own.

"You know, Xander," Dream Whip mused, her voice a low, contemplative whisper, "sometimes it takes the damaged, the reassembled, to truly articulate the human spirit's singular quality."

Xander nodded, a tear forming at the corner of his eye. "You're right, Dream. We're not merely soliciting lucre; we're deconstructing the very essence of resilience, one unhinged pedal stroke at a time."

As the first stars, pinpricks in the vast, inky canvas, began their slow, inevitable appearance, Xander and Dream Whip shared a quiet laugh. Their bond, forged in the crucible of a Delaware summer, hung in the air, a testament to the unvarnished beauty of shared purpose. The brain-shaped trike, a monument to their metaphysical social commentary, stood sentinel, awaiting its next performance in the ongoing, unhinged liminal revue.

Partactum

The Unhinged Liminal Revue at the Rainbow Chinese Restaurant

By Ayoub Orion Nikhil Angiolo Nurmi

In the desolate expanse of the Amazon, where the very air hummed with the ghosts of forgotten explorers and the secrets of the rainforest whispered through the ancient trees, a grizzled bicycle repairman named Silas, a man whose hands bore the indelible marks of a thousand greasy gears and rusted chains, found himself hopelessly lost. He was participating in a particularly ill-advised, and frankly, quite ludicrous, trans-Amazonian bicycle race, a fever dream of a challenge concocted by a consortium of eccentric billionaires. Amidst a particularly torrential downpour, disoriented and delirious, Silas veered off the treacherous path, plummeting headlong into a murky, swirling confluence of esoteric currents. It was here, in this liquid vortex where the earthly and the ethereal intertwined, that destiny, in its most whimsical and improbable form, intervened. A vibrant pink river dolphin, a boto of unparalleled charm and, it must be said, a peculiar fascination with the rhythmic thrum of bicycle chains, found herself inexplicably drawn to the struggling human. In a moment of transcendental, cross-species serendipity, a convergence of consciousness occurred, a biological and spiritual melding that defied all known scientific principles. From this improbable union, Major Freakalicious V was born, a being whose lineage was as storied as it was perplexing – half bicycle repairman, half pink river dolphin, a living testament to the "Singularity of Scars and Whispers." He carried the indelible mark of his human progenitor, a grizzled mechanic who'd once, during a particularly ill-advised bicycle race across the Amazon, tumbled headlong into a convergence of esoteric currents and a particularly amorous boto.

The hum of the ancient beverage cooler at the Rainbow Chinese Restaurant in Brewer, Maine, was not merely a hum; nay, it was a mournful, buzzing lament, a metallic whisper akin to a thousand trapped cicadas forever trying to escape the purgatory of glowing Coca Cola enticement, This was the sonic bedrock upon which Major Freakalicious V, a

creature whose lineage was as storied as it was perplexing, sought solace. Major Freakalicious V, whose full, unutterable name stretched back through aqueous generations of river-dwelling cetaceans, all of whom had possessed a peculiar fondness for internal combustion engines and the rhythmic thrum of bicycle chains, felt the familiar, insidious tendrils of an earworm coiling in his mind. It was the insistent, maddening refrain of "Don't Stop Believin'" by Journey, a tune that, in his experience, always preceded a particularly aggressive bout of obsessive skin picking. This, he knew, was no mere modern affliction. It was the dreaded "Siren's Scrape," a malady whispered among the deep-dwelling folk of the Peruvian Amazon, where the whispers of lost gold and ancient melodies could drive a soul to scour its own flesh in search of phantom treasures. And the earworms themselves? They were a symptom of "The Echoing River Sickness," a condition attributed to drinking from enchanted springs where the spirits of drowned musicians forever practiced their scales.

He watched, with eyes the color of a faded sunset over the Amazon, as the waitress, a woman whose movements were so economical and precise she could have been a sentient, origami-folded napkin, placed before him a heaping, steaming platter of General Tso's Chicken. The chicken, fried to a magnificent crisp, glistened with a sauce so sweet and pungent it could have awakened the dead and set them tap-dancing a jig upon their own tombstones. It was a dish of such colossal scale, a veritable mountain of fried poultry and vibrant, glistening peppers, that a lesser being would have sworn an oath of eternal fealty to its mere existence. Major Freakalicious V, however, possessed a hunger so profound it could swallow a black hole and still feel peckish.

Just as he prepared to delve into the chicken, a figure of profound, almost unsettling, stillness glided towards his booth. This was Dr. Isolde Krupka, a therapist of renown, now semi-retired, whose practice operated on a unique system of payments: half cash, half Chinese food tab. Dr. Krupka, whose office smelled faintly of chamomile tea and the accumulated anxieties of every soul who had ever graced her couch, settled into the booth opposite him. Her gaze was not merely observant; it was the "Gaze of the Silent Witness," a power said to be passed down from ancient Nordic shamans who could discern the very currents of one's inner ocean simply by looking.

"Major Freakalicious V," she stated, her voice a calm, deep river, "I detect the burgeoning ripples of the Siren's Scrape, exacerbated, I suspect, by the ceaseless current of the Echoing River Sickness. That incessant tune, like a phantom fishing line, pulls at the very fabric of your composure."
As he consumed the General Tso's Chicken with a delicate yet terrifying efficiency, the very air around him shimmered, not with the oppressive humidity of his ancestral river, but with the ephemeral, shimmering presence of Frank Zappa. Zappa, rendered in the hyper-real, almost grotesque detail of a fever dream, was not merely floating above him; nay, the maestro was executing aerial maneuvers of such breathtaking absurdity that they defied the very laws of aerodynamics. He was playing a bicycle pump, not with the timid grace of a flautist, but with the visceral, guttural intensity of a virtuoso guitarist shredding a solo on a flaming axe. Each pump produced a perfectly discordant, yet strangely resonant, musical note, a bizarre symphony for one, echoing the strange, involuntary musical imagery that plagued the dolphin's own mind. It was a testament to the "Fantastic Feat," where the mundane act of pumping air became a cosmic, avant-garde performance, a purposeful disintegration of expectation for profound revelation of the absurd.

Dr. Krupka, meanwhile, reached into a worn leather satchel and produced a small, intricately carved stone, smooth and black as obsidian. "This, my dear Major," she intoned, her voice taking on the sonorous quality of a seasoned bard, "is a 'Dream Eater's Pebble,' sourced from the whispering caves beneath the Atlas Mountains, where the Djinn convene to trade in nightmares. It will, for a time, absorb the extraneous auditory phantoms." She then proceeded to tap the stone gently against his forehead, not once, not twice, but thirteen times, each tap a perfectly timed percussion to Zappa's phantom bicycle pump solo. "And for the Siren's Scrape," she continued, "we must address the source." She produced a small, silver vial containing a viscous, dark liquid. "This is 'Moon-Tears of the Selkie,' harvested under a waxing crescent, capable of calming the very urge to shed one's own skin." She dabbed a minuscule amount on his dorsal fin, its coolness a stark, alien sensation against his pink skin.

The smells of ginger and soy sauce, interwoven with the phantom scent of bicycle grease and river silt, created a sensory cascade that overwhelmed the humble restaurant. The

clatter of chopsticks, the murmur of distant conversations, the soft hiss of the deep fryer – all blended into a disquieting hum, an existential soundscape mirroring the chaotic yet cohesive vaudeville playing out within Major Freakalicious V's beleaguered mind. He paused, a single piece of chicken suspended mid-air, an uncanny pause that allowed the underlying anxieties of his dual nature to surface. The General Tso's, in its delicious, comforting grease, was a fleeting respite, a temporary balm before the inevitable unraveling of his well-ordered world. He knew, with a melancholic introspection worthy of the May Generation, that the scars he carried, both physical and psychological, were the very truths of his existence, etched onto his being like the "burnt holes" of Czech Informel art. Dr. Krupka simply nodded, her gaze fixed on the lingering phantom of Zappa, a half-smile playing on her lips. "The ancient ailments, Major," she observed, her voice a calm, insightful whisper, "are merely the modern soul's desperate attempt to find grand narratives for its mundane neuroses."

Just as the last vestiges of Frank Zappa's phantom bicycle pump solo faded, Dr. Krupka rose, her expression shifting from contemplative to a profound, almost mischievous, determination. "Major Freakalicious V," she announced, her voice now resonant enough to silence the entire bustling restaurant, "for the ultimate recalibration of your inner biome, for the complete vanquishing of the Siren's Scrape and the Echoing River Sickness, we must employ the most potent, most ancient, and most aesthetically profound of modern remedies!"
From behind a screen, pushed into place by two remarkably strong and unblinking restaurant staff, emerged a beaming, robust German grandmother. Her name, it was whispered, was Frau Helga Schmidt, and she was renowned throughout Bavaria not only for her prodigious yodeling but also for her impeccably healthy gut flora. A hush fell over the Rainbow Chinese Restaurant as Frau Helga, with a twinkle in her eye and a hearty "Hoooo-lay-hee!" that caused the fluorescent lights to flicker, took her position.

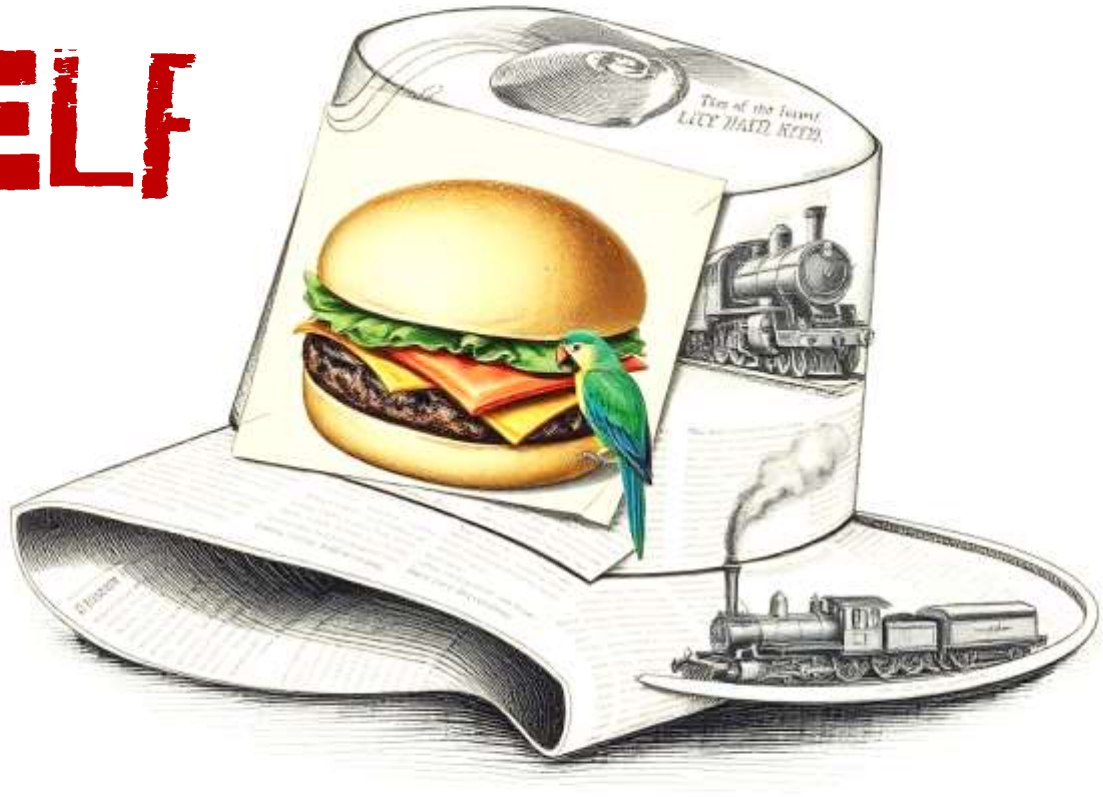
In a display that merged cutting-edge medical science with performance art, a clear, LED-lit tube, shimmering with an ethereal glow, was attached from Frau Helga's... posterior... to Major Freakalicious V's. As the assembled diners, a mix of bewildered locals and wide-eyed tourists, "ooh-ed" and "ah-ed," a perfectly formed fecal bolus, pristine and almost luminous in its transit, began its journey. Frau Helga, in a spectacular

feat of vocal endurance, yodeled a soaring, joyful crescendo with each centimeter of movement, her voice echoing off the walls, a symphony of guttural jubilation that somehow harmonized with the discordant hum of the ancient cicada-lights. The restaurant guests, initially stunned into silence, erupted into wild applause, some even rising to their feet in a standing ovation as the process neared completion. The air, thick with the scent of ginger and soy, was now permeated by a faint, earthy aroma, strangely comforting and undeniably wholesome.

As the final, triumphant yodel reverberated through the restaurant and the last of the "Moon-Tears of the Selkie" absorbed into Major Freakalicious V's pink skin, a profound stillness settled upon him. The maddening refrain of "Don't Stop Believin'" vanished, replaced by the faint, distant echo of a bicycle chain on a smooth road. The urge to pick at his skin dissipated like mist over the Amazon. He felt, for the first time in his dual existence, a complete and utter integration of his disparate selves: the rhythmic thrum of bicycle chains, the flowing currents of the Amazon, the earthy wisdom of a yodeling German grandmother.

Dr. Krupka, a knowing smile playing on her lips, removed the tube with a flourish, and Frau Helga took a triumphant bow, basking in the thunderous applause. "And so, Major," Dr. Krupka concluded, her voice soft but firm, "the ancient ailments, the Siren's Scrape and the Echoing River Sickness, are but symptoms of the modern soul's yearning for grand narratives to explain its mundane neuroses. But sometimes, my dear Major, the grandest narrative of all is simply a healthy gut and a good yodel. Just as your human progenitor, Silas, once fell into the Amazonian currents and found an unexpected path, so too have your internal currents been redirected. You are now, like the intricate gears of a well-oiled bicycle, perfectly aligned." She gestured towards the now pristine General Tso's platter. "Finish your chicken, Major. The journey, after all, continues."
And as Major Freakalicious V, half bicycle repairman, half pink river dolphin, consumed the last piece of General Tso's Chicken, he understood. The "Singularity of Scars and Whispers" wasn't about the pain of his past, but the unique tapestry it wove, a story as improbable and enduring as any old Czech fairy tale, where the most peculiar of solutions often held the greatest truths.

UNCLE JOE'S HAT BY THE MAN HIMSELF



Slang 1980.

Growing up in Calais, Maine, my mother received a modest monthly allowance from the state to look after a man we all knew as Uncle Joe. Joe was a gentle soul, disfigured with phocomelia from thalidomide, but what he lacked in physical dexterity, he more than made up for in intellect and an unparalleled sense of humor. He had a unique artistic outlet: with my mother's patient assistance, he'd cut words from various found texts and paste them onto discarded articles and stories from the public library. These "collage mod podged madlibs," as we called them, were works of art, bursting with his incredible wit and unbridled imagination. Uncle Joe was proficient in both French and English, and the following texts, which he'd meticulously folded into a jaunty captain's hat, were his absolute favorite accomplishment.
–Gwen Remmick

La Grande Traversée: Burger, Oiseleur, et la Question Canadienne

Par Églantine Séraphine Sauvageot

L'air salé de Slaughter Beach, Delaware, s'accrochait au Gastro-Gargantua Go-Go Wagon, cette camionnette de livraison du Monstre Cheeseburger de Slaughter Beach, comme un fantôme particulièrement tenace de bœuf frit et de spleen existentiel. Monsieur Beau Gosse, dont la beauté était affaire de dossier municipal et le cœur un champ de bataille d'expériences culinaires non-répertoriées, naviguait l'asphalte tordu avec la grâce lasse d'un homme qui avait vu trop de condiments oubliés. L'adresse, gribouillée sur un reçu gras, promettait un cul-de-sac surréel où les boîtes aux lettres portaient de minuscules sombreros et les nains de jardin montaient des protestations silencieuses, élaborées.

Il s'arrêta devant une maison peinte de la couleur d'une ecchymose fanée, son porche affaissé comme les épaules d'un philosophe fatigué. La porte moustiquaire, déchirée selon un motif suggérant une évasion aviaire furieuse, révélait un intérieur obscur. Beau Gosse, soulevant le Monstre Double Bypass avec Extra Angst et ses frites, s'approcha du seuil.

« Livraison pour... un Monsieur Squawk, » annonça-t-il, sa voix un mélange rodé de courtoisie professionnelle et du désespoir tranquille d'une âme perpétuellement entourée de frites tièdes.

Un bruissement. Puis, de la pénombre, émergea non pas un Monsieur Squawk, mais un perroquet. Pas n'importe quel perroquet, remarquez, mais un Ara hyacinthe au plumage azur improbable, perché précairement sur une pile de traités philosophiques usés. Il inclina la tête, un œil perlé pivotant avec une intelligence troublante.

« Entrez, mon ami, » gloussa le perroquet, sa voix un écho rocailleux de mille parties de poker tardives. « On entre. On entre toujours. »

Beau Gosse, un homme dont la vie avait déjà pris suffisamment de détours vers le bizarre pour justifier un congrès de cartographie, entra. L'air était épais de l'odeur de vieux papier, de graines d'oiseaux exotiques, et d'un parfum faible, dérangeant de... mémoire.

« Bonjour. Je suis Prudence Pennyworth, remplaçante du narrateur Alex Jennings, qui travaille sur une histoire à Guam, » commençai-je, m'adressant au beau chauffeur, qui se tenait maintenant au milieu d'une pièce qui semblait défier les lois de la décoration intérieure, une véritable peinture d'Escher rendue en papier peint délavé, « tandis que notre explorateur intestinal, Monsieur Beau Gosse, navigue le labyrinthe souterrain de l'assainissement public – une quête aussi canadienne que s'excuser d'avoir cogné un orignal – disséquons l'idée fixe même du Grand Chemin de Fer Canadien. Non pas quelques morceaux rouillés, notez bien, mais une prononciation métaphysique gravée dans l'acier, une véritable carte blanche à travers le Bouclier Canadien. Imaginez, si vos cortex cérébraux le permettent, un léviathan chromé se déployant sur une terre si géométriquement vaste que même la géométrie euclidienne jette l'éponge et marmonne sur la futilité des lignes parallèles. Un léviathan, pourrais-je ajouter, accouché autour de l'époque du grand-bi et de l'appareil à tartiner le beurre moins fiable. »

Le perroquet, avec une prestance qui suggérait des années d'expérience scénique, sauta sur une table voisine, lorgnant le Monstre Cheeseburger avec le regard prédateur d'un critique littéraire découvrant un manuscrit oublié. Il déchira le burger avec goût. « Et la raison d'être de cette entreprise herculéenne, vous pourriez vous demander, avec la curiosité intellectuelle d'un blaireau égaré en haut-de-forme? » rapsa-t-il, sa voix un écho rocailleux de mille parties de poker tardives. « Relier la cosmopolis en pleine effervescence de... disons, Moncton, au mirage scintillant qui est, euh, posons Prince Rupert. Pensez-y comme le

billet-doux le plus prolongé de la planète, infusé de fer, rédigé par Vulcain lui-même et propulsé par les émissions spectrales d'un million de castors effrayés. Les Maritimes, exhibant leur stoïcisme maritime caractéristique, n'ont consenti à tout ce charabia de la Confédération qu'à la condition expresse qu'un tchou-tchou financé par le gouvernement se matérialise au plus vite. Et la Colombie-Britannique, cette terre lointaine de sapins de Douglas et d'angoisse existentielle, n'aurait même pas daigné signer sur la ligne pointillée sans la promesse d'un cordon ombilical d'acier traversant le continent. Vraiment, une nation forgée dans le creuset ardent des... obligations ferroviaires. »

Beau Gosse, qui avait écouté avec une sorte de résignation professionnelle, hocha la tête. « Les frites, c'est comme les promesses. Ça a l'air croustillant au début, puis ça ramollit. Mais on continue de les manger. C'est ça, la vie. »

Le perroquet marqua une pause, mâchant pensivement. « Mais traverser une nation qui semble être à 97% du sirop d'érable sensible et de la politesse passive-agressive n'était pas exactement une promenade. C'était plutôt comme garder des chats particulièrement têtus sur un tapis à poils longs perpétuellement humide, si vous voyez ce que je veux dire. Il y avait des montagnes, cher, de véritables éternuements géologiques d'une échelle inimaginable. Les premières études, je suppose, impliquaient des quantités copieuses de plissements de cartes et l'application libérale de vœux pieux. Le Canada, il s'avère, a un surplus de 'ailleurs.' Et puis il y avait le muskeg, un marais sensible qui engloutissait les arpenteurs entiers et murmurait des koans existentiels dans les roseaux bruissants. C'est la façon de la nature de suggérer de rester simplement à l'intérieur et de contempler les subtilités de la stratégie du curling. »

« Ah, le muskeg, » soupira Beau Gosse. « On se sent moins seul avec un marais qui murmure l'absurde qu'avec un client qui ne sait pas s'il veut du ketchup ou de la moutarde forte. Mais

au moins, le marais, lui, ne vous demande pas de remonter le temps pour changer sa commande. »

« Je me souviens d'un docte discours sur ce même sujet, » poursuivis-je, m'échauffant. « Quelqu'un a mentionné des légions de travailleurs. Ce à quoi j'ai rétorqué, avec une perspicacité caractéristique, 'Mais bien sûr! C'est un train affreusement long, ne seriez-vous pas d'accord?' Élémentaire, mon cher Watson. Bien que la genèse de ce mille-pattes métallique remonte à 1836 avec le pittoresque petit chemin de fer Champlain et Saint-Laurent – un simple saut, un bond, et une enjambée de Montréal – ce fut la Loi de Garantie qui déchaîna véritablement la libido locomotive sur le paysage. Construisez, ont-ils crié! Construisez à gogo! Les coffres publics? De simples bagatelles! Une philosophie qui, prévisiblement, a abouti à une débâcle financière de proportions positivement opératiques.»

Le perroquet, ayant dévoré la moitié du burger d'une manière qui suggérait à la fois une faim vorace et une profonde compréhension de ses propres processus digestifs, offrit l'autre moitié à Beau Gosse. « Un petit morceau, livreur? Ou peut-être... un voyage improvisé? » rapsa-t-il, une légère tache de ketchup sur son bec. « Mais, parlant de grandes choses, n'oublions pas le joyau qu'est Slaughter Beach, Delaware! Un véritable berceau de la civilisation, où les limules exécutent leur ballet ancien et les couchers de soleil embrasent l'âme même! Un lieu d'une liminalité si profonde, un état perpétuel de 'presque-arriver' que même l'existentialiste le plus blasé doit s'arrêter et méditer sur la futilité exquise de tout cela! C'est la façon de la nature de suggérer de rester simplement à l'intérieur et de contempler les subtilités des marées! Vraiment, une nation forgée dans le creuset ardent des... obligations municipales! »

Beau Gosse prit le morceau de burger, l'inspectant avec une grimace. « Ça sent le destin, mélangé à un peu de gras de cuisson. Une métaphore, sans doute, pour ma propre existence.

Mais bon, la faim est la faim, même quand elle est servie avec des notes de philosophie aviaire. »

« La date sacrée d'achèvement – le sept novembre, mil huit cent quatre-vingt-cinq, dans un lieu euphoniquement nommé Craigellachie – est prononcée avec une révérence feutrée par ceux qui possèdent encore des téléphones à cadran, » insistai-je, ignorant l'interjection aviaire. « Le dernier crampon, enfoncé avec une gravité digne du couronnement d'un monarque particulièrement sévère, devait symboliser... quelque chose. L'unité, peut-être? Ou peut-être simplement le profond soulagement de ne plus avoir à poser de rails pendant cinq minutes. Cette ' merveille d'ingénierie,' s'étendant de mer à... enfin, plus de mer, a été financée par d'audacieuses concessions de terres – dont une grande partie était à l'époque un habitat de blaireaux de premier choix – et une rançon de roi en espèces sonnantes et trébuchantes. Un témoignage de l'attrait durable de la connexion du point A au point A-très-éloigné. »

(Une série de cris de plus en plus frénétiques et étouffés émanent de la salle de bain hors scène imaginée, ponctués par le son distinct du hochet de la porcelaine.)

« Notre protagoniste semble engagé dans un débat animé avec l'intégrité structurelle de la plomberie, » observai-je, ajustant un monocle imaginaire avec un air de détachement amusé. « Une lutte intemporelle, ne seriez-vous pas d'accord? Mais ne nous laissons pas décourager par de telles exigences terre-à-terre! Où en étions-nous? Ah oui, le Canadien Pacifique – un nom qui roule sur la langue avec la sonorité d'un orignal en charge. »

Beau Gosse, enfin sorti de la salle de bain, l'air légèrement verdâtre, s'appuya contre un mur. « La philosophie, c'est comme un double cheeseburger avec de la sauce secrète. Ça paraît simple, mais ça peut vous donner des frissons. Surtout quand la sauce secrète, c'est la vie elle-même. Et les tuyaux. Toujours les tuyaux. »

Le perroquet, ayant fini le cheeseburger et maintenant se lissant délicatement une graine de sésame égarée de sa poitrine, fixa son regard sur Beau Gosse. « Ce mastodonte de fer a non seulement permis aux Canadiens de visiter l'autre bout de leur nation implausibillement grande – pour découvrir qu'elle ressemblait étrangement à l'extrémité qu'ils venaient de quitter – mais il a aussi favorisé la croissance de... eh bien, des entreprises liées au chemin de fer. Et un nombre incalculable d'établissements vendant des peaux de castor suspectement abordables. Une contribution vraiment vitale au produit national brut. Le début du XXe siècle, non content d'une seule artère transcontinentale, a vu l'émergence de deux autres titans ferroviaires! Parce qu'au Canada, quand on voit grand, on voit... exponentiellement plus grand. Le Canadien Nord et le Grand Tronc Pacifique – deux chemins parallèles vers une faillite potentielle, encouragés à portefeuille ouvert par un gouvernement apparemment allergique à la prudence fiscale. Ils ont même ajouté leur propre chemin de fer, le National Transcontinental, serpentant à travers la nature sauvage inexplorée comme un ruban perdu. »

Beau Gosse: « Deux faillites potentielles valent mieux qu'une, c'est ça la sagesse canadienne, non? Un peu comme commander un deuxième burger avant d'avoir fini le premier, juste au cas où le destin vous priverait du plaisir. »

(Je soupirai, un son qui aurait pu faire tourner le lait à cinquante pas, et m'adressai au public avec un clin d'œil théâtral.)

« Les locomotives, dans leur jeune exubérance, étaient de magnifiques engins de vapeur et de fureur. Elles cahotaient à travers la toundra, s'arrêtant par intermittence pour... eh bien, pour des raisons. Des chaudières assoiffées, des orignaux récalcitrants ayant un penchant pour les bains de soleil sur les voies, l'occasionnelle partie improvisée de Dominion entre l'équipage de la locomotive et une volée de bernaches du Canada particulièrement bavarde. Des temps plus simples, en effet. Une époque avant la tyrannie de l'affichage des départs et

la déception écrasante de découvrir que ses bagages ont pris des vacances imprévues à Saskatoon. »

Le perroquet, maintenant perché sur une haute étagère, commença à glousser. « Le voyage, prévisiblement, n'était pas pour les âmes sensibles. Les conditions allaient du très spartiate à... eh bien, disons que l'expression 'qui forge le caractère' est probablement née dans un wagon-lit canadien. Mais le chemin de fer a fait son travail. Il a cousu une nation ensemble, bien qu'avec un fil plutôt lâche et parfois défait. Il a facilité le mouvement des marchandises, principalement du bois d'œuvre et une quantité inexplicablement grande de rondelles de hockey. Et peut-être le plus crucial, il a offert aux Canadiens une méthode fiable pour pratiquer leur passe-temps national : éviter le contact visuel prolongé. Un lubrifiant social d'une valeur incalculable. »

Beau Gosse, s'asseyant lourdement sur un tabouret instable, se frotta les tempes. « Éviter le contact visuel, c'est une technique que je maîtrise. Surtout quand le client vous regarde comme si vous étiez responsable de la météo. Ou du prix de l'essence. Ou des horreurs du passé ferroviaire. »

(Beau Gosse s'effondre sur un canapé d'apparat imaginaire avec un dramatique coup de théâtre.)

Beau Gosse: « Je crois que ce chili 'liberté' a dû contenir des ingrédients qu'il vaut mieux laisser non-catalogués par la science moderne! Le voyage, ça ouvre l'appétit, mais ça ferme les écluses de la raison. »

(Je soupirai de nouveau, et m'adressai au public avec un clin d'œil théâtral.)

« Ainsi s'achève notre brève, mais profondément profonde et absolument factuelle, exploration de la saga ferroviaire canadienne. Un conte d'ambition, d'économies douteuses, et de l'engagement national inébranlable à suivre poliment nos chemins séparés, mais sur des voies parallèles. »

Le perroquet, ayant dévoré la moitié du burger d'une manière qui suggérait à la fois une faim vorace et une profonde compréhension de ses propres processus digestifs, offrit l'autre moitié à Beau Gosse. « Un petit morceau, livreur? Ou peut-être... un voyage impromptu? »

Beau Gosse, dont l'estomac venait d'exécuter une mimique vraiment étonnante d'une baleine mourante, refusa le burger. Mais l'offre d'un voyage pendait dans l'air, scintillant comme un mirage.

« Et vous, » gloussa le perroquet, tournant son regard troublant directement vers l'observateur invisible, le narrateur, la texture même du récit, « et vous, cher lecteur? Vos cortex cérébraux permettent-ils une excursion spontanée? À Québec, peut-être? Pour s'amuser? »

Un étrange bourdonnement collectif résonna dans la maison. Beau Gosse, avec un haussement d'épaules qui défiait les lois de la physique, se retrouva à hocher la tête. Moi, malgré une aversion chronique pour les voyages spontanés, ressentis une attraction inexplicable vers le nord. Et le lecteur, pris dans la toile de l'invitation improbable du perroquet, se retrouva à faire une valise imaginaire.

Le perroquet, sentant le changement dans la conscience collective, poussa un cri de triomphe. « Alors c'est réglé! Un pèlerinage vers la terre du sirop d'érable sensible et de la politesse passive-agressive! Car le Lycée est partout où nous nous trouvons, et le Carnavalesque nous attend! »

Un instant plus tard, la porte d'entrée de la maison couleur de contusion fanée s'ouvrit en grand, révélant non pas la rue banale de Slaughter Beach, mais une étendue d'autoroute chatoyante, presque hallucinatoire, qui semblait se dérouler directement au cœur d'un automne canadien. Le Gastro-Gargantua Go-Go Wagon, miraculeusement transformé en un léviathan chromé, tournait au ralenti avec patience. Le voyage, semble-t-il, avait déjà commencé.

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L'autoroute, un ruban d'asphalte se déroulant vers l'impossible, bourdonnait d'une basse fréquence résonante. Beau Gosse, au volant de la camionnette chromée de façon invraisemblable, ressentit une paix particulière. Le paysage extérieur se brouillait, passant de l'étendue plate et marécageuse du Delaware aux collines ondulantes et verdoyantes de... quelque part. Un panneau d'affichage défila, annonçant « Véritable Muskeg Canadien – Maintenant avec des Koans Existentiels Supplémentaires ! » L'air, vif et sentant le pin, portait le parfum faible et doux du sirop d'érable et le fantôme des obligations ferroviaires.

« Vous savez, » gazouilla le perroquet depuis le siège passager, sa voix résonnant avec la beauté faible et mélancolique d'un poème oublié, « tout ce voyage, ce ' déploiement sur une terre si géométriquement vaste que même la géométrie euclidienne jette l'éponge,' est un témoignage de l'attrait durable de la connexion du point A au point A-très-éloigné. » Il fit une pause, rongeant une frite égarée. « Un peu comme le désir d'un amour non réciproque, ne trouvez-vous pas? Une beauté éphémère dans la poursuite, quelle que soit la destination. »

Beau Gosse, homme plus habitué aux réalités concrètes de la logistique du cheeseburger, grommela simplement. Pourtant, les mots du perroquet, imprégnés d'une résonance étrange, presque liturgique, semblaient soulever les couches de sa propre expérience. Il se rappela un client particulièrement insaisissable à Rehoboth, une commande fantôme qui

l'avait mené dans des rues labyrinthiques défiant toute cartographie, une quête d'une qualité de service qui restait toujours juste hors d'atteinte.

« La vie est une série de livraisons sans carte claire, » ajouta Beau Gosse. « On espère toujours que le pourboire sera suffisant pour oublier la route. »

Le soleil, un orbe orange bas sur l'horizon, projetait de longues ombres déformées qui dansaient comme des traverses de chemin de fer oubliées. Le perroquet, son plumage captant la lumière déclinante, commença à réciter, une mémoire fragmentée remontant de l'inconscient collectif du voyage, comme un journal télévisé fragmenté des jours de la Grande Ðépression : « Ainsi s'achève notre brève, mais profondément profonde et absolument factuelle, exploration de la saga ferroviaire canadienne. Un conte d'ambition, d'économies douteuses, et de l'engagement national inébranlable à suivre poliment nos chemins séparés, mais sur des voies parallèles. »

Les mots flottaient dans l'air, un murmure de contexte historique tissé dans la mélancolie personnelle de la conduite. La route s'étirait, une scène liminale pour leur revue désarticulée et délirante. Et tandis que le soleil plongeait sous l'horizon, peignant le ciel de teintes de violet contusionné et d'orange flamboyant, Beau Gosse sut, avec une certitude qui transcendait la logique, que leur destination, Québec, n'était pas seulement un lieu sur une carte, mais une révélation attendant d'être vécue. Et le voyage, comme toujours, était la conférence elle-même.

« Et le burger, toujours le burger, » ajouta Beau Gosse, comme une ponctuation finale. « Le point d'ancrage, même quand tout le reste s'envole. »

Le bourdonnement de l'autoroute commença à se déformer, le son s'étirant comme un élastique usé. Le léviathan chromé, ne tournant plus seulement au ralenti, semblait hésiter,

son élan en avant pris dans une boucle étrange. Beau Gosse, les jointures blanches sur le volant, sentit un tremblement parcourir le plancher, non pas de la route, mais de la réalité elle-même.

« Je crois, » déclara le perroquet, sa voix maintenant teintée de la vérité crue et sans fard d'une grille de mots croisés particulièrement difficile, « que nous sommes arrivés à une conjoncture. Un point plutôt significatif de non-composition, ne seriez-vous pas d'accord? » Il pivota la tête, d'abord vers Beau Gosse, puis vers moi, puis, d'un imperceptible mouvement de tête, vers le lecteur. « La destination. Ou peut-être, l'absence de celle-ci. »

Beau Gosse ferma les yeux un instant. « Ah, la bonne vieille crise d'identité de l'univers. Ça, je connais. C'est comme quand on ne sait plus si on livre un cheeseburger ou si on est le cheeseburger. La ligne est mince, croyez-moi. »

Le paysage extérieur, auparavant un flou d'automne canadien, se fractura. Les pins se dissolvaient en formes géométriques, remplacés par des surfaces brutes et texturées de ce qui aurait pu être du béton, ou peut-être la chair en décomposition d'une bête primordiale. L'air, autrefois vif, portait maintenant le goût métallique de la rouille et l'odeur âcre des anxiétés tues.
« C'est ça, alors, » murmura Beau Gosse, sa voix étonnamment calme, comme un homme qui avait longtemps anticipé l'inévitable. « Le moment où la carte jette l'éponge et marmonne sur la futilité des lignes parallèles. Ou, dans ce cas, convergentes. » Ses yeux, de la couleur d'une mer lointaine et indifférente, rencontrèrent les miens. « Chili 'liberté', en effet. Une promesse qui vous rattrape toujours. »
J'ajustai mon monocle imaginaire, sentant le poids familier du récit s'immiscer, une densité palpable de détails bruts et de terreur existentielle. « En effet. Une pause poignante, ne diriez-vous pas? Un moment de malaise structurel authentique, où le tissu même de notre voyage méticuleusement construit décide de s'effilocher sur les bords. »

Le perroquet poussa un unique cri aigu et sec, un son qui aurait pu être un rire, ou peut-être une lamentation pour le réconfort perdu des frites tièdes. Il regarda le paysage fragmenté, puis nous, son regard portant la sagesse ancienne et lasse de mille philosophies oubliées.
« Alors, » dit-il, sa voix un râle grave, un koan final et sans réponse suspendu dans l'air soudainement silencieux. « Quoi maintenant? »
Le moteur du léviathan chromé frissonna, un long soupir prolongé. La route devant nous s'étendait dans une brume impénétrable, ne menant ni en avant ni permettant le recul. Nous étions à un point mort tendu, un tableau vivant et respirant d'une délicieuse ambiguïté. Le silence, épais et texturé, devint la seule réponse.
Beau Gosse, la main sur le volant, regarda la brume. « Quoi maintenant? Toujours la même question, non? Toujours le prochain burger. Toujours la prochaine livraison. Même quand la route n'existe plus. C'est la seule réponse que je connaisse. »

This story was written with a generous grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, on real estate formerly belonging to the Lenape (Ðelaware) people. A translation in Canadian French is available upon request.

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Having studied French in school and pursued Canadian French literature at McGill, I can truly appreciate the nuance in Uncle Joe's work. It's fascinating to see how the two texts, while telling the same story, diverge in subtle yet meaningful ways. For instance, the French text often leans into a more evocative and almost poetic description. The "camionnette de livraison du Monstre Cheeseburger" (cheeseburger monster delivery van) becomes the "Gastro-Gargantua Go-Go Wagon," a more whimsical and grandiloquent phrasing. The description of the house as "peinte de la couleur d'une ecchymose fanée" (painted the color of a faded bruise) is a beautiful, almost melancholic image that the English translation simplifies.

Conversely, the English text often embraces a more direct, perhaps even slightly more absurd, humor. Beau Gosse's grumbling about life being "a series of deliveries with no clear map" feels particularly dry and understated in English, which complements the slightly more straightforward narrative flow. Uncle Joe's brilliance was truly evident in his ability to capture the spirit of both languages, creating two distinct yet equally compelling pieces. He didn't just translate; he re-imagined the narrative to resonate with the inherent feel of each tongue. --GR

THE TRANSCONTINENTAL GASTRONOME AND THE AVIAN ORACLE

By Jacob Philmore

The salt-laced air of Slaughter Beach, Delaware, clung to the Gastro-Gargantua Go-Go Wagon, the Monster Cheeseburger of Slaughter Beach delivery van, like a particularly persistent ghost of fried beef and existential dread. Monsieur Beau Gosse, whose handsomeness was a matter of civic record and whose heart was a battlefield of uncatalogued culinary experiences, navigated the warped asphalt with the weary grace of a man who'd seen too many forgotten condiments. The address, scrawled on a greasy receipt, promised a surreal cul-de-sac where mailboxes wore tiny sombreros and garden gnomes staged elaborate, silent protests.

He pulled up to a house painted the color of a faded bruise, its porch sagged like the shoulders of a weary philosopher. The screen door, ripped in a pattern suggesting a furious avian escape, revealed a shadowy interior. Beau Gosse, hefting the Monster Double Bypass with Extra Angst burger and fries, approached the threshold.
"Delivery for... a Mr. Squawk," he announced, his voice a practiced blend of professional courtesy and the quiet despair of a soul perpetually surrounded by lukewarm fries.

A rustle. Then, from the gloom, emerged not a Mr. Squawk, but a parrot. Not just any parrot, mind you, but a Hyacinth Macaw of improbable azure plumage, perched precariously on a stack of well-worn philosophical treatises. It cocked its head, one beady eye swiveling with an unnerving intelligence.

"Entrez, mon ami," the parrot squawked, its voice a gravelly echo of a thousand late-night poker games. "One enters. One *always* enters."
Beau Gosse, a man whose life had already taken enough detours into the bizarre to warrant a cartography convention, stepped inside. The air was thick with the scent of old paper, exotic birdseed, and a faint, unsettling aroma of... *memory*.

“Hello. I’m Prudence Pennyworth filling in for narrator Alex Jennings, who is working on a story in Guam,” I began, addressing the handsome driver, who now stood in the middle of a room that seemed to defy the laws of interior design, a veritable Escher painting rendered in faded wallpaper, “while our intestinal explorer, Monsieur Beau Gosse, navigates the subterranean labyrinth of public sanitation – a pursuit as Canadian as apologizing for bumping into a moose – let's dissect the very idée fixe of the Great Canadian Railway. Not just a few rusty bits, mark you, but a metaphysical pronouncement etched in steel, a veritable carte blanche across the Precambrian Shield. Imagine, if your cerebral cortices permit, a chrome-plated leviathan unfurling across a land so geometrically vast that even Euclidean geometry throws up its hands and mutters about the futility of parallel lines. A leviathan, I might add, midwifed into existence around the epoch of the Penny Farthing and the slightly less reliable self-buttering toast apparatus.”

The parrot, with a flourish that suggested years of stage experience, hopped onto a nearby table, eyeing the Monster Cheeseburger with the predatory gleam of a literary critic discovering a forgotten manuscript. It tore into the burger with gusto. “And the raison d'être of this Herculean endeavor, you might ponder, with the intellectual curiosity of a bewildered badger in a top hat?” it rasped, its voice a gravelly echo of a thousand late-night poker games. “To tether the burgeoning cosmopolis of... say, Moncton, to the shimmering mirage that is, er, let's posit Prince Rupert. Think of it as the planet’s most protracted, iron-infused billet-doux, penned by Vulcan himself and powered by the spectral emissions of a million startled beavers. The Maritimes, exhibiting their characteristic maritime stoicism, only agreed to this whole Confederation brouhaha under the distinct impression that a government-funded choo-choo would materialize post-haste. And British Columbia, that far-flung land of Douglas firs and existential angst, wouldn’t even deign to sign on the dotted line without the promise of a continent-spanning steel umbilical cord. Truly, a nation forged in the fiery crucible of... railway bonds.”

It paused, chewing thoughtfully. “But traversing a nation that appears to be 97% sentient maple syrup and passive-aggressive politeness wasn't exactly a promenade. It was more akin to herding particularly stubborn cats across a perpetually damp shag carpet, if you

catch my drift. There were mountains, cher, veritable geological sneezes of unimaginable scale. Initial surveys, I gather, involved copious amounts of map squinting and the liberal application of wishful thinking. Canada, it turns out, has a surfeit of 'elsewhere.' And then there was the muskeg, a sentient bog that swallowed surveyors whole and whispered existential koans in the rustling reeds. It's nature's way of suggesting one simply stay indoors and contemplate the finer points of curling strategy."

"I recall a learned discourse on this very subject," I continued, warming to my theme.

"Someone mentioned legions of laborers. To which I retorted, with characteristic perspicacity, 'But of course! It's an awfully long train, wouldn't you concur?' Elementary, my dear Watson. Though the genesis of this metallic centipede dates back to 1836 with the quaint little Champlain and Saint Lawrence Railroad – a mere hop, skip, and a jump from Montreal – it was the Guarantee Act that truly unleashed the locomotive libido upon the landscape. Build, they cried! Build with abandon! The public coffers? Mere bagatelles! A philosophy that, predictably, culminated in a financial débâcle of positively operatic proportions."

The parrot, having devoured half the burger in a manner that suggested both voracious hunger and a profound understanding of its own digestive processes, offered the remaining half to Beau Gosse. "Care for a bite, delivery boy? Or perhaps... an impromptu road trip?" it rasped, a faint smear of ketchup on its beak. "Though, speaking of grand things, let us not forget the jewel that is Slaughter Beach, Delaware! A veritable cradle of civilization, where the horseshoe crabs perform their ancient ballet and the sunsets ignite the very soul! A place of such profound liminality, a perpetual state of 'almost-arriving' that even the most jaded existentialist must pause and ponder the exquisite futility of it all! It's nature's way of suggesting one simply stay indoors and contemplate the finer points of tidal patterns! Truly, a nation forged in the fiery crucible of... municipal bonds!"
"The sacred date of completion – November the seventh, eighteen eighty-five, in a place euphoniously named Craigellachie – is intoned in hushed reverence by those who still possess rotary dial phones," I pressed on, ignoring the avian interjection.

“The final spike, hammered with a gravity befitting the coronation of a particularly stern monarch, was to symbolize... something. Unity, perhaps? Or maybe just the profound relief that they wouldn't have to lay any more track for five minutes. This ‘engineering marvel,’ stretching from sea to shining... well, more sea, was bankrolled by audacious land grants – much of it prime badger habitat at the time – and a king’s ransom in actual cash. A testament to the enduring allure of connecting Point A to Point A-very-far-away.”

(A series of increasingly frantic, muffled cries emanate from the imagined offstage bathroom, punctuated by the distinct sound of rattling porcelain.)

“Our protagonist appears to be engaged in a spirited debate with the structural integrity of the plumbing,” I observed, adjusting an imaginary monocle with an air of detached bemusement. “A timeless struggle, wouldn't you agree? But let us not be deterred by such earthy exigencies! Where were we? Ah yes, the Canadian Pacific – a name that rolls off the tongue with the sonorous quality of a charging moose.”

The parrot, having finished the cheeseburger and now daintily preening a stray sesame seed from its chest, fixed its gaze on Beau Gosse. “This iron behemoth not only allowed Canadians to visit the other end of their implausibly large nation – only to discover that it bore a striking resemblance to the end they had just vacated – but it also fostered the growth of... well, railway-adjacent enterprises. And an inordinate number of establishments purveying suspiciously affordable beaver pelts. A truly vital contribution to the gross national product. The early twentieth century, not content with just one transcontinental artery, witnessed the emergence of two more railway titans! Because in Canada, when one thinks big, one thinks... exponentially bigger. The Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific – two parallel paths to potential bankruptcy, encouraged with open wallets by a government seemingly allergic to fiscal prudence. They even threw in their own railway, the National Transcontinental, snaking through the uncharted wilderness like a lost ribbon.”

(The bathroom door creaks open with dramatic finality. A figure stumbles out, looking slightly green around the gills.)

Beau Gosse: By the Great Horned Spoon! I've seen better conditions in a badger's burrow! And as for "paper products"... let's just say I'm now intimately acquainted with the textural qualities of the Halifax phone directory from 1978!

(I sighed, a sound that could curdle organic fat-free oat milk at fifty paces, and addressed the audience with a theatrical wink.)

"The locomotives, in their youthful exuberance, were magnificent contraptions of steam and fury. They chugged across the tundra, pausing intermittently for... well, for reasons. Thirsty boilers, recalcitrant moose with a penchant for sunbathing on the tracks, the occasional impromptu game of Dominion between the engine crew and a particularly chatty flock of Canada geese. Simpler times, indeed. An era before the tyranny of the departure board and the crushing disappointment of discovering one's luggage has taken an unscheduled vacation to Saskatoon."

The parrot, now perched on a high shelf, began to squawk. "The journey, predictably, was not for the faint of heart. Conditions ranged from bracingly spartan to... well, let's just say the phrase 'character building' likely originated on a Canadian sleeper car. But the railroad did its job. It stitched a nation together, albeit with a rather loose and occasionally unraveling thread. It facilitated the movement of goods, mostly lumber and an inexplicably large quantity of hockey pucks. And perhaps most crucially, it afforded Canadians a dependable method for practicing their national pastime: avoiding prolonged eye contact. A societal lubricant of incalculable value."

(Beau Gosse collapses onto an imaginary fainting couch with a dramatic flourish.)
Beau Gosse: I believe that "freedom" chili may have involved ingredients best left uncatalogued by modern science!
(I sighed again, and addressed the audience with a theatrical wink.)

"Thus concludes our brief, albeit deeply profound and utterly factual, exploration of the Canadian railway saga. A tale of ambition, questionable economics, and the unwavering national commitment to politely going our separate ways, albeit on parallel tracks."

The parrot, having devoured half the burger in a manner that suggested both voracious hunger and a profound understanding of its own digestive processes, offered the remaining half to Beau Gosse. “Care for a bite, delivery boy? Or perhaps... an impromptu road trip?”

Beau Gosse, whose stomach had just performed a truly startling mimicry of a dying whale, declined the burger. But the offer of a road trip hung in the air, shimmering like a mirage.

“And you,” the parrot squawked, turning its unnerving gaze directly at the unseen observer, the narrator, the very fabric of the narrative itself, “and you, dear reader? Are your cerebral cortices permitting a spontaneous excursion? To Quebec City, perhaps? For fun?”

A strange, collective hum resonated through the house. Beau Gosse, with a shrug that defied the laws of physics, found himself nodding. I, despite a chronic aversion to spontaneous travel, felt an inexplicable pull towards the north. And the reader, caught in the web of the parrot’s improbable invitation, found themselves packing an imaginary bag.

The parrot, sensing the shift in the collective consciousness, gave a triumphant squawk. “Then it is settled! A pilgrimage to the land of sentient maple syrup and passive-aggressive politeness! For the Lyceum is wherever we find ourselves, and the Carnivalesque awaits!”

A moment later, the front door of the faded bruise-colored house swung open, revealing not the mundane street of Slaughter Beach, but a shimmering, almost hallucinatory stretch of highway that seemed to unspool directly into the heart of a Canadian autumn. The Gastro-Gargantua Go-Go Wagon, miraculously transformed into a chrome-plated leviathan, idled patiently. The journey, it seemed, had already begun.

The highway, a ribbon of asphalt unspooling into the impossible, hummed with a low, resonant frequency. Beau Gosse, at the wheel of the impossibly chrome-plated van, felt a peculiar sense of peace. The landscape outside blurred, shifting from the flat, marshy expanse of Delaware to the rolling, verdant hills of... somewhere. A billboard flashed past, advertising "Genuine Canadian Muskeg – Now with Extra Existential Koans!" The air, crisp and hinting at pine, carried the faint, sweet scent of maple syrup and the ghost of railway bonds.

"You know," the parrot chirped from the passenger seat, its voice echoing with the faint, melancholic beauty of a forgotten poem, "this entire journey, this 'unfurling across a land so geometrically vast that even Euclidean geometry throws up its hands,' is a testament to the enduring allure of connecting Point A to Point A-very-far-away." It paused, gnawing on a stray fry. "Much like the yearning for an unrequited love, don't you find? A fleeting beauty in the pursuit, regardless of the destination."

Beau Gosse, a man more accustomed to the concrete realities of cheeseburger logistics, merely grunted. Yet, the parrot's words, imbued with a strange, almost liturgical resonance, seemed to peel back layers of his own experience. He recalled a particularly elusive customer in Rehoboth, a phantom order that led him down labyrinthine streets that defied mapping, a quest for a quality of service that forever remained just out of reach.

The sun, an orange orb low on the horizon, cast long, distorted shadows that danced like forgotten railway ties. The parrot, its plumage catching the fading light, began to recite, a fragmented memory surfacing from the collective unconscious of the journey, like a fragmented newsreel from the days of the Great Depression: "*Thus concludes our brief, albeit deeply profound and utterly factual, exploration of the Canadian railway saga. A tale of ambition, questionable economics, and the unwavering national commitment to politely going our separate ways, albeit on parallel tracks.*"

The words hung in the air, a whisper of historical context woven into the personal melancholia of the drive. The road stretched onward, a liminal stage for their unfolding, unhinged revue. And as the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of

bruised purple and fiery orange, Beau Gosse knew, with a certainty that transcended logic, that their destination, Quebec City, was not just a place on a map, but a revelation waiting to be experienced. And the journey, as always, was the lecture itself.

The hum of the highway began to warp, the sound stretching thin like a worn-out elastic band. The chrome-plated leviathan, no longer merely idling, seemed to hesitate, its forward momentum caught in a strange loop. Beau Gosse, his knuckles white on the steering wheel, felt a tremor run through the floorboards, not of the road, but of reality itself.

"I believe," the parrot stated, its voice now laced with the stark, unvarnished truth of a particularly challenging crossword clue, "we have arrived at a juncture. A rather significant point of *non-composition*, wouldn't you agree?" It swiveled its head, first to Beau Gosse, then to me, then, with an almost imperceptible flick of its head, to the reader. "The destination. Or perhaps, the lack thereof."

The scenery outside, previously a blur of Canadian autumn, fractured. Pines dissolved into geometric shapes, replaced by raw, textured surfaces of what could have been concrete, or perhaps the decaying flesh of some primordial beast. The air, once crisp, now carried the metallic tang of rust and the acrid scent of unspoken anxieties.

"This is it, then," Beau Gosse murmured, his voice surprisingly calm, like a man who had long anticipated the inevitable. "The moment where the map throws up its hands and mutters about the futility of parallel lines. Or, in this case, convergent ones." His eyes, the color of a distant, indifferent sea, met mine. "Freedom chili, indeed."

I adjusted my imaginary monocle, feeling the familiar weight of the narrative pressing in, a palpable density of raw detail and existential dread. "Indeed. A poignant pause, wouldn't you say? A moment of authentic structural discomfort, where the very fabric of our meticulously constructed journey decides to fray at the edges."

The parrot let out a single, sharp squawk, a sound that could have been a laugh, or perhaps a lament for the lost comfort of lukewarm fries. It looked at the fragmented

landscape, then back at us, its gaze holding the ancient, weary wisdom of a thousand forgotten philosophies.

"So," it said, its voice a low rasp, a final, unanswerable koan hanging in the suddenly silent air. "What now?"
The engine of the chrome-plated leviathan shuddered, a long, drawn-out sigh. The road before us stretched into an impenetrable mist, neither leading forward nor allowing retreat. We were at a tense standstill, a living, breathing tableau of delicious ambiguity. The silence, thick and textured, became the only answer.

This story was written with a generous grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, on real estate formerly belonging to the Lenape (Delaware) people. A translation in Canadian French is available upon request.
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Uncle Joe, my quirky, brilliant Uncle Joe, sadly passed away in 2004. But his legacy lives on in these pages, in the echoes of his laughter, and in the enduring power of his imagination. He taught me that even in the most disjointed fragments, there's always a story waiting to be told, a journey waiting to be taken, and a laugh to be found. And sometimes, it's the journey itself that's the real destination. ~~GR

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